TRANSCRIPCIÓN DE LA ENTREVISTA REALIZADA A JOHN GARTH

15 DE OCTUBRE DE 2017, TORTOSA, TARRAGONA

MF: Mónica "Findûriel"

JG: John Garth

MF: So, first of all, thank you very much for attending the STE meeting. It's a pleasure and an honor to have you here. Hope you had fun with us.

JG: It's been very lovely, thank you very much.

MF: So, you're going to talk about Tolkien and your work over Tolkien's life. So, how did your interest on Tolkien's life and works began?

JG: Well, It began very early. I read C.S. Lewis Narnia's books when I was seven, and that's when I became a reader of books. And naturally I think I was heading for Tolkien. And my mother owned the LOTR but never read it and I'd take it off the shelf and looked at the maps and the names and the inscriptions, the doors of Durin... And I knew that I wanted to travel here but I thought "No, not until I'm 18 or something". But one evening I was bored and I took it off the shelf myself to read it. I was nine. I never looked back. It reached me very very early and I suppose helped to build who I became.

MF: So at nine?

JG: Yeah

MF: I read it at nine too.

JG: Did you? Did you?

MF: Yes, I started with the Hobbit, not the Lord of the Rings.

JG: That's cheating

MF: But when I finished the Hobbit immediately started with the Lord of the Rings. It's quite a nice age I think to start with Tolkien because he has so much stuff in there that you can't really understand until you take over the years and you find new stuff in here.

JG: I think I've re-read the Lord of the Rings perhaps 6 times in the next 2-3 years. And by that time I sort of understood it. But I'm still learning.

MF: Yes, you still find some new material inside it. So, what took you to research on that specific period of Tolkien's life, his Second World War experiences? When did the idea of a book take form?

JG: The First World War

MF: The First World War, sorry

JG: That's slightly complicated. Basically one of my passions of Tolkien is the invented languages. So I was always wanting to make elvish dictionaries, right? With the history of Middle Earth Christopher Tolkien's amazing twelveth volume accounted his father's development of Middle Earth. I realized that you can't make a straight dictionary of elvish because it kept changing.

So my next big idea was to make a catalogue of all the texts that Tolkien wrote and all the elvish in each text and then I had this astonishing database that was kind of stratified across time. And because that was too vast a project I never finished it. But it meant that I ended up looking really closely at what Tolkien was doing when. And I noticed that in the book of lost tales his first version. In Christopher Tolkien's presentation of it he mentions army training camps where Tolkien wrote certain poems.

So I thought, well naturally if I can find out more about what Tolkien did on the First World War, then I'll be able to understand better the order in which he wrote things. And I simply got carried away with the process of researching what he did on the First World War. By chance… so I decided I'd write and make a small fanzine article and by chance within 2 or 3 weeks there was news which was that the military service records, the personal records about the First World War British army officers were being released to the public for the first time. I think it was an 80 year period that it was kept closed. So it was 1998 so I was the first through the door to look at Tolkien's. Which was an amazing experience. It was a slow process but I read everything I could find about the specific battles that he was involved in and then I realized there was a larger subject than that. Because the First World War was not about the battles there was a huge cultural event and it penetrated deep into private life and every single possible way so it was a fascinating journey.

MF: It was a sign of the age. It changed a whole generation so it was quite crucial. So from a catalogue it went into an article about something different and then went into a book So what kind of trouble did you find when researching the early life of the author? Was there any peculiar or shocking anecdote in the process?

JG: The difficulties I had were essentially finding specific things about Tolkien personally. He did not write, as far as we know, any full diary of his time during First World War and there were certain things that we know he wrote which are not available so his letters to Edith haven't ever been published except a very, very short excerpt and still unavailable for research so that was closed off so I had to find other things but I managed to track down the family of Robert C. Wilson, another of the members of the TCBS and they had a tin buck full of Rob's letters written from university and from the army training camps in the First World War and from the trenches right up to few days before he was killed on the first day of the battle of the Somme and there were references to

Tolkien and more importantly there were references to all the circle of friends and you got a really good sense of the kind of people they were. That was great.

Eventually the Tolkien State allowed me to look at some specific papers at the Bodleian library at Oxford that relate to my topic. A small collection of papers that Tolkien had kept. He did have a little diary about his time in France but it was really just a list of dates on where he was. And far better, there was the body of letters between him and the other members of the TCBS and when I had access to that, it was deeply moving to read about this people, get inside their heads, see how they changed during the First World War from boys to men and I think that really gave the heart to my book which was otherwise military detailed and the detail of Tolkien's… the development of his writing. So these are the three… It's a tripod with the TCBS letters in the middle of it.

MF: Yes because the book is quite based on the correspondence which is something quite intimate but it's also the own voice of the protagonists talking by themselves, so it is a treasure chest you found.

JG: I wanted to get their voices into it as much as possible particularly because 2 of them died so young so I felt that it was kind of a tribute I suppose to them, a way of rescuing their lost voices and restoring them to some kind of life.

MF: What did their families think about the material you used and how you treated it?

JG: Well Rob Gilson's family have been fantastic and have allowed me to see more and more over the years. Last year I finally saw his sketch books. He was the member of the TCBS whose particular talent was in visual arts and he had all these little sketch books that he would paint watercolors in, or ink and watercolor paintings of landscapes and castles and churches and so forth. Really very beautiful. Not purely sophisticated. These were things that he would travel with and he went to Venice and he painted things from Venice and maybe he painted 2 or 3 in a day so it was a quick work. It really allows you get inside his head. And I think this is something that he shared with Tolkien. This is something he and Tolkien could relate. Because there were certain areas of Tolkien's mind that Gilson had no particular affinity with I think. Probably the philology it was somewhat far into Gilson's mindset. But the art… you can even see there's one painting where it's pretty clear to me, because of the date and the place, that Gilson was staying with Tolkien when he painted it because Tolkien painted the very similar thing, very similar area within 2 days of Gilson.

MF: So, have you learned something different from Tolkien that the vision you already had and the biographies and works?

JG: Yes. Certainly as a young man the strange thing is that I was having to look at him through the eyes of this best friends and I suppose the shock. You ask me if anything was particularly shocking.

The shock was simply that he was often really remote from them. He was very close and they found him frustrating, clearly they hero-worshipped Tolkien. They admired his intellect, his vision at a very early stage and they wanted to have him as part of their circle as much as possible but he was often unavailable and I think sometimes it was probably because he was seeing Edith, to whom he was engaged at the time, but I suspect that sometimes it was simply because he was a very private man and he would sometimes had apart moments because the early death of his parents and so on, but he would also have intense creative periods which kept him closed off from his friends.

MF: It's like Niggle, no? The painter removed from society

JG: That's right that's a really good portrait of a solitary artist at work, isn't it?

MF: Since the book was published, did you find any new information that you would consider adding on a new edition, perhaps?

JG: Well, I've done a lot more research on all kind of areas. Some of it has got into a small book Tolkien Exeter College which covers again those years from 1911 to 1915 that I covered in Tolkien in the Great War but specifically deals with an area which I had to neglect in Tolkien in the Great War: his student life at Oxford. The reason why I had to neglect that, was because those TCBS letters. There wasn't space for that other distraction: Tolkien and other friends so I made that Exeter College material quite short in Tolkien in the Great War. Looking at that period again I looked again at the early development of his mythology and I think I answered some of the key questions, and I now understand what he meant when he said that the language and the mythology developed side by side it was almost as a step process. He was inspired by Beowulf, the anglosaxon poem, the Old English poem, and other things to start writing about heroes: He wrote his poem about Eärendil, the mariner who sails off the edge of the world and becomes the evening star, in Sept 1914 and then he wrote an adaptation of the finnish Kalevala story of Kullervo. And when that was Published, which was after Tolkien in the Great War, it revealed that inside that story, an adaptation from finnish legend, Tolkien had used an invented language and the words from the invented language, some of them were clearly quenya. So this was elvish in waiting. He had been started to craft it at that stage clearly he did not know what to do with it, so he was putting it into this story where it didn't really fit, I think of a Cuckoo chicken in a nest, you know, it's clear to me that one of the reasons that he didn't finish the story of Kullervo was because he got excited then about the idea of creating a world where that language he was inventing will have its own home.

MF: So this construction of Tolkien in layers it's quite clear when you make some research on his life also. We know that he did not specially like the work of biographers. Were you influenced by this opinion from Tolkien when you were writing the book?

JG: I was always concerned that people would just say "no, this is…we're not interested in a biography of Tolkien because he himself objected to biograph". But when I look at what Tolkien actually said it's clear that he changed his mind depending on the period of his life, when he was writing his letters and who he was writing to. So there were certain people he might trust more than others. When he became a public figure and his life was put under some scrutiny, he was uncomfortable, I think he was increasingly uncomfortable. The older he got, the more famous he became, and that's where you read these pronouncements, you know "biographies is no key to understanding work of literature". At other points he says that it also explain how he invented Middle Earth, a full autobiography will be the only way, "and I have no intention of writing one" he said. So my job has been to, if you like, try to go straight to Tolkien's autobiography, that sounds terribly arrogant but you know the…it's impossible but the idea is there you really, you have to try to think yourself into his position, I don't have his talents. If I had, I wouldn't be writing about him, I would be inventing my own world, but it is possible to see the steps he took the…and then start to understand the urges that drove him.

MF: So the approach you made to his life was through the people who knew him, and also documents by him, we can notice it when reading your book, you have really close attention to details, and you have made a really meticulous research, we have heard about this box of R. Q. Gilson's letters but, did you find any other vein of mithril, something that made you say "wow, I find something really interesting here"?

JG: I have to think about that one.

MF: Something that moved you specially like R.Q. Gilson's letters, for example.

JG: Well, new discoveries…ah, there are…there are all kinds of very moving moments in researching Tolkien in the Great War, but actually many of them I've not been able to use so I spend a lot of time looking of the experiences of the war records of other officers in Tolkien's battalion, and there were just heartbreaking stories in there, and one that always sticks in my mind, these records, I think, they include correspondence between parents and soldiers and the war office, the ministry that was responsible for the army… So there was one case where there's a letter from the parents of two men, I've been told their son has been killed, and the letter simply said "which one?"

MF: Which one…wow.

JG: So they know one of their sons is dead but they don't know which one and I found that just terribly heartbreaking. As sneak example of something but actually I had no room in my book. I think you know, the most moving thing in the long term has been to return to what Tolkien wrote, particularly to *The Lord of the Rings*, and see it from a new perspective, from a perspective of knowing what he went through, and then re-reading the passage of the *Death Marshes* for example in that context, but also the whole of the psychological journey of Frodo, if you read that side by side with *Tolkien and the Great War* or…or indeed with some of the memoirs and novels written by First

World War soldiers and…there are some incredible similarities in terms of what Frodo saw and…and what you can see is going through his…his mind, how his soul is suffering.

MF: Have you been in touch with Tolkien's family or did you learn if any of Tolkien's descendants read your book?

JG: Well, I know Christopher Tolkien read it.

MF: Lucky you.

JG: Because he had to…In fact he read two versions of it…or three. Two, two versions. He had to give his approval because it was being published by Harper Collins who…The publisher who publishes Tolkien's books in Britain, and they have an agreement with the Tolkien Estate, they will not publish anything the Estate does not approve of and…so that was a challenge. And he did make criticisms of the draft that he saw and I made some major changes actually to the book. So, initially, it was going to include five chapters dealing with what Tolkien wrote after the First World War right up to the *Lord of the Rings* and it was going to talk in detail about how the war experiences affected those writings, and I removed that. So now *Tolkien and the Great War* simply ends with what I called a Postscript, where I gather all of my general reflexions on how the war experiences affected his writing in general, is much more brief, much less detailed, I think it works really well actually. It allows me to write more or less straight history and then voice my opinion and then to allow the reader to go away and consider the rest of it. Having said that, you know the chapters that I sacrificed, have been turn into talks that get very well received and I think some of they will eventually end up in another book, so I'm working on one at the moment which I call *Tolkien's mirror* and I should get in there.

MF: So one of the questions we are going to ask you was about your new book, could you give us and advance? An exclusive? Could you talk a little bit about your new work?

JG: Essentially it takes the technique of *Tolkien and the Great War* in terms of looking at what Tolkien wrote in the context of his life and the events of his times, and uses that to try to understand the process of creativity, to try to understand how far his work is a reflexion of his times rather than simply being an imaginive, images and visionary creations that has no relation to what was going on, it is no packed with biographical detail in the way *Tolkien and the Great War* is and it covers the period I go back to the start the First World War so I could talk again about my discoveries about the very beginnings of the mythology and how that happened, that's vital. And it runs until the end of the *Lord of the Rings* somethings awful not to say, chapters on the creation myth, the music of the Ainur, the Ainulindallë, on the invention of Númenor, on pass of *The Lord of the Rings* the Death

Marshes of I see a key one and the talk that I gave here about how Edith and England are both reflected inside the mythology that's an important part of it too, yeah.

MF: So also talking about fantasy and also epics the have been kind of mistreated sometimes by the cannon and, do you think that trend is changing? Fantasy is being considered more seriously in the literary world in the research of the universities?

JG: Yes, I mean, that's visibly true, and I think it's something that would certainly continue to happen, I mean there was a period in the early Twentieth century I suppose when, the idea of studying writers like Charles Dickens or Jane Austen was consider a waste of time, because these were books people read for pleasure, they read them anyway why would you need to go and actually study them, and I think something of the same attitude with with fantasy, people haven't taken it seriously. Obviously it's a huge and vital literary form and I think this is any of you recognize in is, there'll be steps, and what's contributed to this big step at the moment I think it's pretty obviously is *Game of Thrones* which has reached a huge audience and before that *Harry Potter* and then who knows what would come next but clearly there's an ongoing whitening of the pool and with cinema too, with CGI the movies are so focused on producing fantasy and Sci-Fi because that's what movies can do now so well…that…it can only continue to open up the field for close study.

MF: Because, for example, works like Narnia are really highly important in England, I've travelled there some years ago and they were premiering the first movie and everybody knew about Narnia, everybody have read Narnia when they were children but that… it didn't seem to happen with The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, it happened the same on the last Century, Dracula wasn't considered canon until de 1980s so we hope that in the future with research works like yours it will help Tolkien to be more widely spread and studied.

JG: Yes, I can add just something there. When I was starting to write Tolkien and the Great War one of my urges was to prove this was worthwhile, a worthy study...worthy subject of literary study and not escapism. That was the big…the big problem were for me. And the Peter Jackson movies, Lord of the Rings movies, whatever your feelings viewers about them are, and I know many Tolkien's fans that actually love them I admire many aspects of the Lord of the Rings movies I have some qualms about them because I'm a purist a book purist.

MF: We call ourselves the Tolkisition

JG: Right, right. But what they did do is the opened those books up to many people who would never pick up a thousand page novel and they showed the book has a deep seriousness, and the…anyone can identify with, and is recognizable where that feeling comes from. So my book was possible in the sense that now Harper Collins, the publisher, knew there was a market for something like that book,

and it's changed, I think, attitudes towards Tolkien, so now people think, not so often of him as the elderly professor, with his pipe and his tweed jacket, more of him as a war veteran with something to say that matters.

MF: We have seen this trend in Spain, because we have had just a handful of people who made their PhD's on Tolkien, one of the first ones was Eduardo Segura, who was the translator of your book, are you familiar with his works? Or did you meet him?

JG: I met…I was trying to remember exactly when I met Eduardo but it was a long time ago, maybe it have been before I finished writing Tolkien and the Great War, but he was very keen to translate the book as soon as we talked about it and…it took I think ten years before that actually became possible.

MF: We have followed his translations through social networks and sometimes he was deeply moved about he...about what he was reading at the moment, he couldn't tell anything, because it was on process but he told us some of the passages moved him deeply.

JG: It is a dif…it is like that. I mean, there are passages that moved me deeply and I have to record and audiobook version of it, and there were many passages that I read out loud to myself five or six times until I could do it without my voice catching, you know…yeah.

MF: And are you also familiar about uncle Curro? The research work that our friend Jose Manuel Ferrández made about Father Francis?

JG: I am, he's allowed me to read an English draft translation, and it's fascinating. It really changes my perspective on…you know, really important aspects of Tolkien's life because he thought of father Francis, he called him "my second father" and of course he didn't know his first father really at all, he died when he was 4 years old. So I was just commenting to Jose Manuel the last night watching the festivities at the Estelcon and comparing them to the British Tolkien Society they're quite similar these events Oxonmoot, Estelcon and there are serious scholar sides to it but there is also the fun side, the costumes, and the songs and performances and so on…but I would say that here there's more gusto or more people sharing that "gusto" so Oxonmoot there will be people like me who rather more reserve and stand on the side lines and then more and more of those people, you know…And I think that probably just the British way.

MF: And also the age…this is quite a young society we've been founded in 1991, so we are quite, perhaps young people and quite new to this kind of societies. So…

JG: Yeah, maybe, but the Tolkien's societies come soonly bringing new members so they have that too I think it's a cultural difference I think…And reading Jose Manuel's book I understood how Francis Morgan loved to perform himself and I can see that from looking at Tolkien as a young man, looking at the school records of his performances, his performances Mss Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, a woman who cannot use the English language properly at all, and a lot of comedy comes out of her using the wrong words. So I can see that Tolkien may well have been influenced in that kind of talent and enjoyment by his time with Father Francis, I…very very likely, Tolkien stood out in that way among all his school friends, you read a review in the school magazine of the plays and, you know, Tolkien is the best, that's basically what they said, he steals the show. So, if I were able to travel through time, I mean, there are so many things that I would like to deal to do, talk to Tolkien…That, that moment, Tolkien as Mss. Malaprop, I would just love to see.

MF: It was going to be my next question. You would travel to that specific time to see him perform.

JG: That's maybe the first thing that I do, yeah, yeah.

MF: And this is quite a typical question: If you could make him a question, what would you ask?

JG: Oh Gosh…that's difficult.

MF: Think of one.

JG: I have a list of questions, there's a say in England "as long as your arm" but is far longer than anyone's arm, I said pass the watcher in the waters, assuming… I would be thinking of all the questions that I have when I'm researching, did you read this? What did you think of it? Did you know this person? What did you mean when you mention this in this note in tengwar? So, yeah…there are particular influences… I don't know what to mention, but I think… I think obviously if I could have a drawn out relaxed conversation with him and this would, this would be the kind of conversation I think it would take probably many years building trust. I would want to know about the Somme, and how he felt and… it related to what he wrote on The Lord of the Rings. Because he says in his letters, there's a letter where he says "no, my book was not influenced by the First World War…except in the landscapes". The death marshes and the Waste Land in front of the Gate of Mordor and then he says: there is more influence by William Morrison, XIX century Author that he really admired, and his Roots of the mountains, which is one of Morrison's great romances set it the early Middle Ages. Now I've read the roots of the mountains and I can see certainly that that influence is Tolkien's depiction of Rohan and Eowyn, is that very very plain to me. Is not at all plain to me that, that book influence, those landscapes of the Death Marshes, of the Dagorlad the battle plain. So yeah, that's a big statement and I will want to unpicked, I will want to ask Tolkien "look what do you mean by this? that can't be right. And hear what he would have to say.

MF: Have you visit it physically? The field of the Somme and the historical places.

JG: I have, yeah. So I wrote the first draft, this is when I intended to write that fanzine article and it turned into 44 thousand words, and I went to the Somme with a friend and we walked around the places where Tolkien was involved in particular actions, military attacks and I was able to locate, because of detail in the army records, exactly where his trench was, where his dugout was, where he would have been posted as signals officer, the man in charge of his battalions communications. And I read through what I had written in my draft and compared it with the landscape around me, and I think the…the most helpful thing about that was to realize that when military writers of the First World War talk about having to fight their way out a terrible hill, ok, if you go and see that terrible hill, it looks like a small slope. It looks like a gentle slope you hardly notice it was there, this is a…you look at it now, it is a peaceful landscape of open fields, and little woods, and it's almost impossible to imagine anything ever happened there apart for farming. Except that from time to time about the roadside you see small collections of rusted artillery shells that still being turned up by the plows and so on, and they put them by the roadside to be collected and safely disposed of because some of them are still dangerous. So I would look at this landscape and I've been reading about in a steep steep slope and I saw a gentle slope, what I realized was simply that any slope, however small was an advantage, specially if you have machine guns, because you could put the machine in such position that anyone advancing at that slope, they might as well trying to climb Everest.

MF: It's breath taking.

JG: Yeah.

MF: We could be here, talking to you for ages but unfortunately we run out of time. The next activity will be the ceremony, the Award Ceremony, so, so far, did you enjoy your stay with us? Did you enjoy the experience?

JG: It's been lovely, thank you very much. Yes, yeah. And the feast in the castle last night it was like travelling through time, among all these people in their finery, yeah.

MF: Thank you very much. Thank you.

JG: My pleasure.

Entrevista transcrita por Rebeca "Nai" y Paula "Erendis".